



The Chester Civic Trust

*Founded in 1960, Registered Charity No 504634*



## Urban Design Statement No 1

### **‘TOWNSCAPE WITHIN THE WALLS’**



## FOREWORD

**by Stephen Langtree**  
(Vice President, Chester Civic Trust)

If we agree that Chester is a 'special place', what has made it so? Why is it where it is? How has it evolved and which of its characteristics do we need to protect?

This 'townscape analysis' answers many of these questions and sets out a framework within which future development of the city centre should be considered.

Chester Civic Trust is indebted to Oliver Bott, a former Cheshire County Conservation Officer and long-standing member of our committee, for the skill and expertise he has shared with us. We hope that all who read this document will have a better understanding of how Chester has evolved over two millennia and how important it is to maintain its character and setting.

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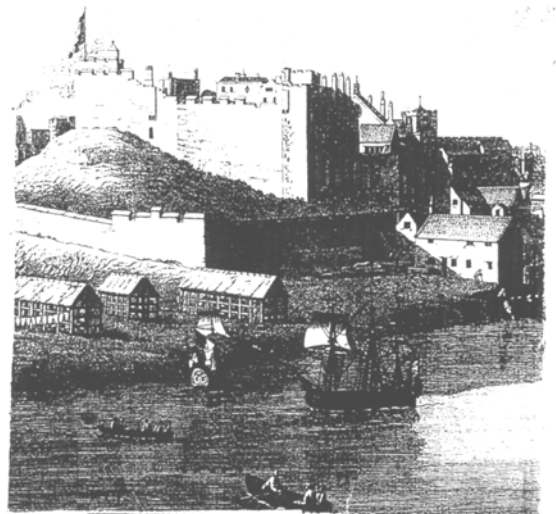


## CHESTER CIVIC TRUST DESIGN STATEMENT

### TOWNSCAPE ANALYSIS AND URBAN DESIGN CRITERIA FOR THE HEART OF CHESTER WITHIN THE CITY WALLS

#### CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Each ancient town has its singular features. The contours of the land give it form and a tidal river may boost its trade. A raised position which faces foreign princedoms will commend it to an ambitious monarch, both as defensive stronghold and a base from which to advance - and rich enough farmland on its doorstep may clinch his choice.



*Plate 1 - Chester Castle in 1749*

Chester enjoys those advantages, as Roman invaders saw in the first century AD, and the Normans a thousand years later. Under the Saxons and Normans the fortress and military harbour were to become the seat of regional government, a centre of monasticism and a major trading port. These were the assets which have helped to give the heart of Chester within its Walls its unique distinctiveness.

While Cromwell's troops prepared to besiege Chester in the 1640s the royalist defenders destroyed almost every building where attackers could shelter from view outside the City Walls. Everything medieval except the Old Dee Bridge, St John Baptist's church and the Anchorite's Cell was destroyed. The 1960s saw the almost total destruction of all standing Roman structures within the City Walls, to make way for shopping malls and car parks. The buildings within the Walls - the urban scene analysed in this report - date from the 11th to the 20th century. They are the basis on which Chester's attractiveness as homeplace, commercial city and tourist centre depends.

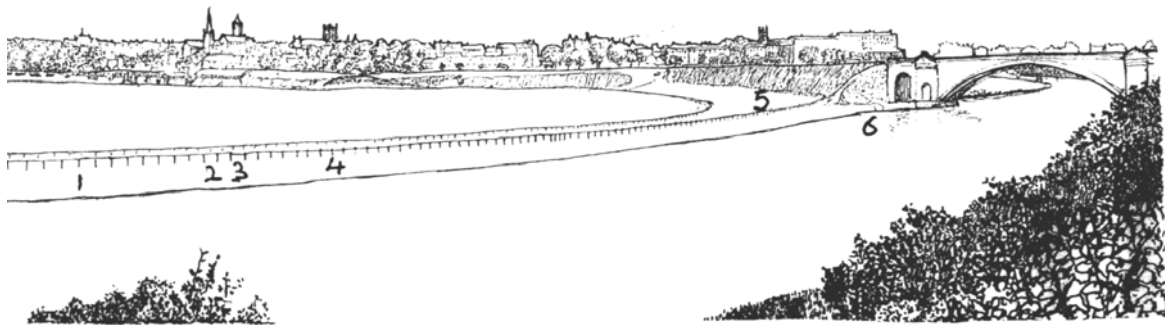


## CHAPTER 2 - THE CITY CENTRE SEEN FROM EXTERNAL VIEWPOINTS

The impact of new development within the City Walls can affect the prospect from suburban viewpoints as severely as that from adjacent streets. Vistas from the Roodee, Curzon Park and the path on the south bank of the river, from the Grosvenor Bridge via Handbridge and Queens Park to the Meadows and (across the river) Sandy Lane and Dee Banks, are of special value to the enjoyment of Chester.

From the Norman Conquest (1066) until the 14th century Wales was the main target for English aggression, and so also of retaliatory raids. The River Dee was the first barrier that raiders must cross, so its banks offer the best standpoints from which to observe the walled city.

Until the 1940s the community itself had designed and built most of the landmarks within the city centre. Photographs in the City Record Office show how spires and towers dominated the skyline as seen across the Dee and the Roodee in 1906 from Curzon Park. Landmarks on plate 2 are (1) Northgate Brewery chimney (demolished), the spires of (2) Trinity Church (now the Guildhall) and (3) the Town Hall, the towers of (4) the Cathedral and (5) St Mary on the Hill, then (6) Chester Castle upstream of the Grosvenor Bridge.



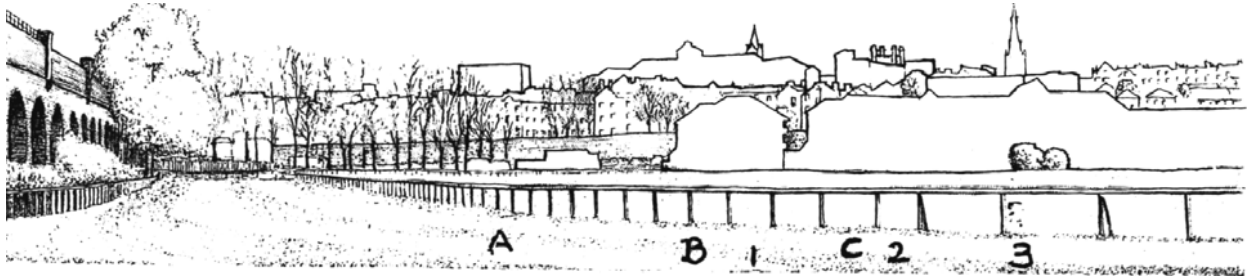
***Plate 2 - The City Centre from Curzon Park in 1906***

The viewpoint from which plate 2 was taken is now a private garden, but similar panoramas can be enjoyed from the steps by the railway viaduct over the Dee, the path round the Roodee and the Chester golf course.



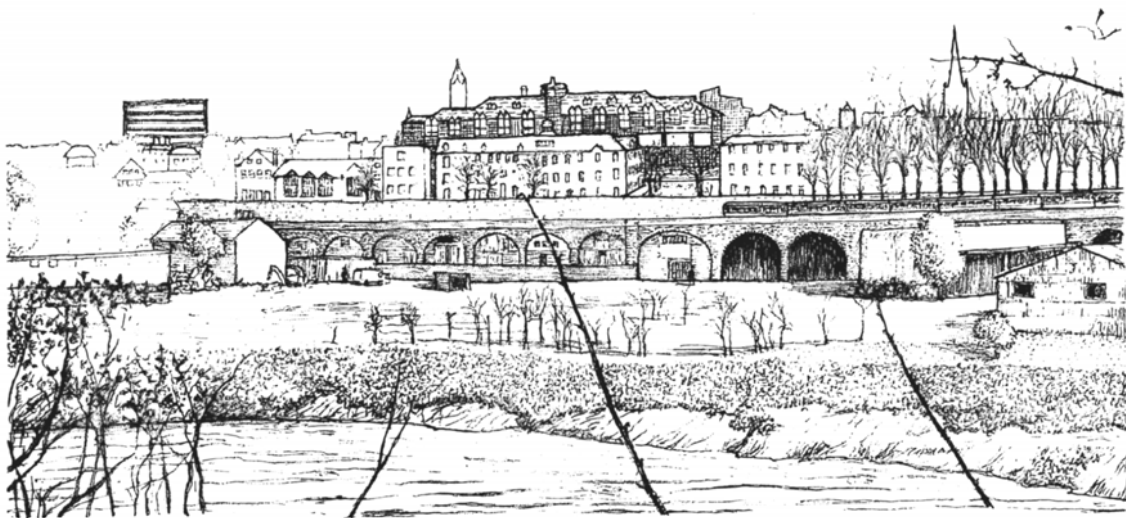


Plate 3, taken from a point on the Roodee by the viaduct, suggests how tall or massive recent buildings have damaged the skyline or diminished the view toward the west face of the old city. Landmarks still visible are (1) part of the Town Hall spire, (2) the corner turrets of the Cathedral tower and (3) the spire of Trinity Church, now the Guildhall. Twentieth century buildings which impinge on the skyline are (A) Commerce House, (B) the intrusive Moat House Hotel and (C) Hamilton House and now the new Holiday Inn Express Hotel.



***Plate 3 - City Centre from the Roodee by the Railway Viaduct***

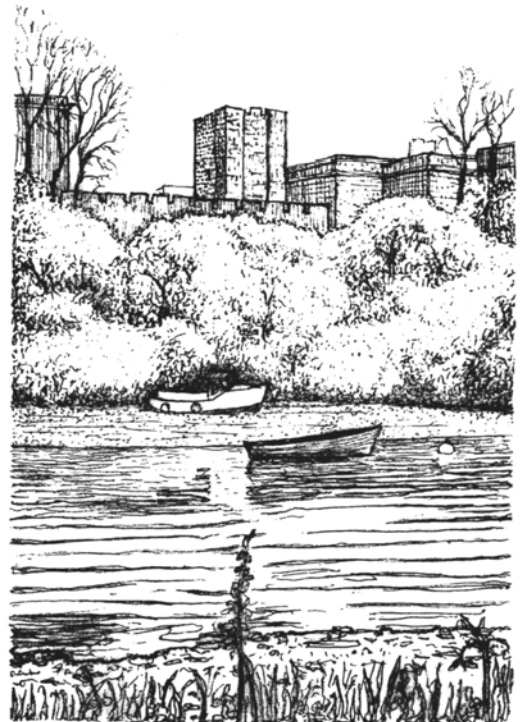
Plate 4 is taken from the golf course which used to enjoy a panorama of the Georgian town houses on City Walls Road, Nun's Road and Stanley Place, the Place being just left of the train on the viaduct, with the Town Hall and Cathedral behind. Plate 4, drawn in 2001, shows how the Moat House Hotel then dominated the scene, curtailed the view of the Town Hall tower and concealed all but the tip of one corner turret of the Cathedral tower. That scene emphasises the need for sensitive design so as to enhance the interest and beauty of views inward to the old city. However, land between the river and the railway and immediately behind the viaduct is now being redeveloped with apartments and these together with the new Chester HQ buildings will seriously alter the skyline especially between Saint Mary's Church, the Castle, and the Roodee.



***Plate 4 - The City Centre from Chester Golf Course***



Views toward the city from Handbridge have fared better than those from the Roodee, the railway and the golf course. Plate 5 shows the south rampart and Agricola's tower from the riverside path at Edgar's Field, the only surviving full external viewpoint of the castle, with the undisturbed river in the foreground. The riverside path upstream from Edgar's Field offers a number of good vistas, close and distant, of the walled city



***Plate 5 - Chester Castle as seen across the River Dee***

***Conclusion:*** *The heart of Chester is of such interest and beauty, and has such an attractive green setting from which to view it, that policies for the walled city and the riverside vantage points must be interlinked.*

***Objective:*** *To identify significant external viewpoints toward the walled city and to develop effective policies to protect inward and outward vistas.*





### CHAPTER 3. - AREAS OF DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER

The character of each part of a town depends on who possesses the land at periods crucial to its development, and the purposes for which they held or hold it. In Chester three types of landowner shared most of the city centre between 1066 AD and the 1540s: the Church, through St Werburgh's Abbey and the lesser religious houses including friaries and convents; the monarch's viceroy, the Earl of Chester, who held Chester Castle and adjacent land; the burghers - merchants and men of wealth or influence - who built and occupied the town houses on the main thoroughfares: Bridge Street and Lower Bridge Street, Eastgate Street, Watergate Street and parts of Northgate Street.

Each type of landholder had a different purpose, so they developed their property in different ways. Their stewardship and the rise or fall of their wealth or power are clear to see in the parts of the town which they held. Chance and change over a thousand years have softened the appearance of streets, squares and buildings on the church and burghers' lands, but townscape at the heart of the Earls of Chester's land has retained its geometric, formal, axially planned character.

**The churchmen** had vowed to serve their God and succour the poor and needy. Some of them held great wealth from their flocks' donations, and lands given by benefactors yielded further revenue, but the physical evidence which survives in Chester suggests that they have been less greedy or worldly-wise than the burghers. On his dissolution of the monasteries Henry VIII converted the Abbey into the Cathedral, so it still possesses the Close and Abbey Green. In Abbey Square and Street the clergy houses are now mostly Georgian; the Cathedral lawns and the Green remain a leafy and spacious oasis between Northgate Street, St Werburgh Street and the City Walls. In the King Street area the Abbey's land comprised gardens and orchards until after the Protestant reformation, then was sold and gradually built up with houses.

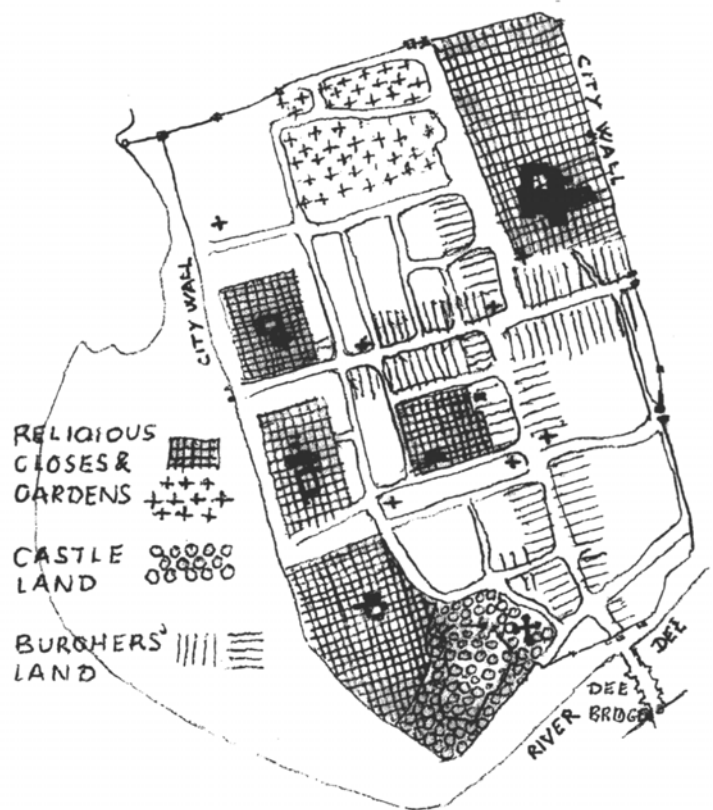
King Henry VIII sold the land of the minor religious houses (which lay on the rectangle between St Martins Way/Nicholas Street and the western City Wall and in the Commonhall Street/ Whitefriars area) to secular purchasers who were to build Chester's largest element of neo-classical town houses between the end of the 16th century and the early 19th century.



Plan 1 shows the approximate positions of medieval church, crown and burgher holdings within the City Walls.

**The Earls' castle and administrative head-quarters** stood between Blackfriars, Nicholas Street, Castle Street, Saint Mary's Hill and the southern angle of the City Walls. During the middle ages the area was governed as a royal enclave, distinct in form and purpose.

It remains unique in character because in ownership and purpose it has evolved rather than dissolved over the past nine hundred years. The architecture proclaims a seat of power: regal formality, crown courts and regimental museum.



***Plan 1 - Medieval streets and landholdings***

**Burgher plots on the commercial streets** occupy the portion of the city centre which is most attractive to shoppers and visitors - the medieval highways which follow the lines of the viae of the Roman fortress, with minor deviations. Scant Roman remains survive in a few undercrofts below ground, not easy for visitors to find or view. After the Norman conquest the incoming burghers were quick to demolish and replace the Saxon buildings which they found in 1066. The interest and beauty of the principal shopping streets is nonetheless immense. There are features of interest from every period between the thirteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of those, two are unique; we owe their presence to historic events:

**The Rows** are the upper floor galleries which line Eastgate Street, Bridge Street, Watergate Street and a little of Northgate Street. Individual front galleries were not unusual in medieval town houses, but Chester is unique in their linkage during the middle ages to provide direct covered access for visitors to the second storey of most merchants' premises. The impetus to expand the system came in the 1270s. A huge boom in revenue and building expertise ensued when King Edward I chose Chester as his base for conquest, then castle-building, in Wales.

\* \* \* \* \*



**Vernacular Revival architecture** of the highest quality flourished in Chester during the second half of the nineteenth century to an extent scarcely matched elsewhere. The growth of trade as railways introduced rapid and affordable transport fired Cestrians' eagerness to enrich their city, but it was the first Duke of Westminster as a percipient client and John Douglas and Thomas Lockwood as his gifted architects who transformed the image of the city with such skill and ardour.

**Conclusion:** *Within the Walls Chester has three areas of great but contrasting interest and beauty, to which must be added the few pockets of well-built nineteenth century cottages. Although the principles of conservation and enhancement are parallel, great care and skill are needed if their individual distinctiveness, a prime focus of interest to residents, workers and visitors, is to endure. They are assets which greatly enhance Chester's cultural and economic vivacity and should be our first concern.*

**Objectives:** *To identify characteristics and features which give each area its individual quality and distinction. To develop policies to encourage their conservation and enhancement. To encourage visitors to understand and enjoy the quality of each area - the richly varied components of the city within the Walls.*

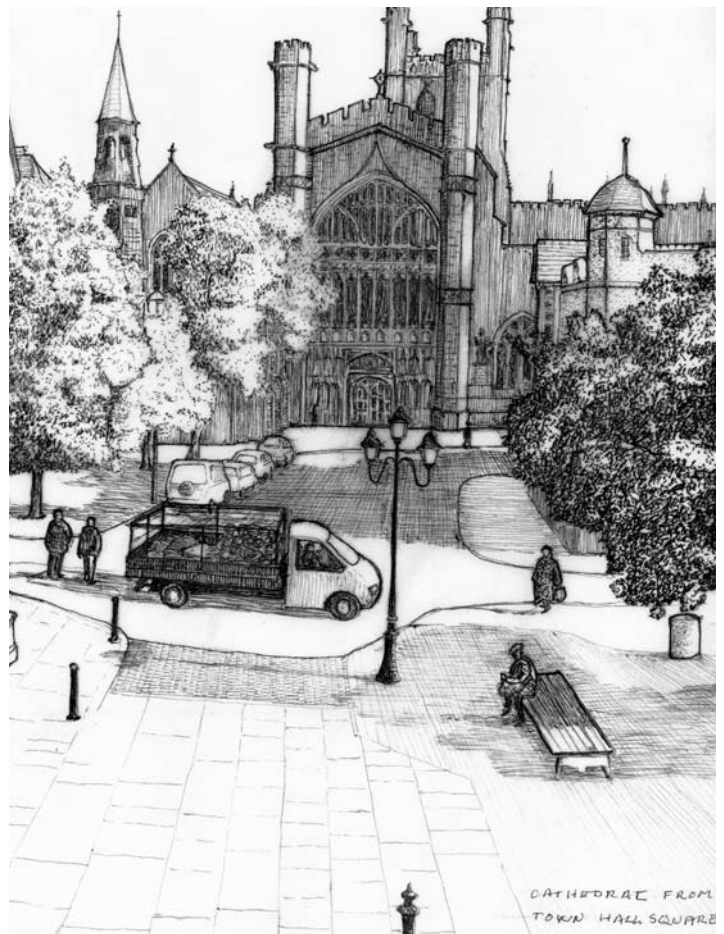
*The beauty and interest of buildings and townscape within the City Walls is such that our watchword here should be Creative adaptation, not Destruction then renewal.*



## CHAPTER 4 - ST WERBURGH'S ABBEY: CATHEDRAL CLOSE AND ABBEY GREEN

In an urban scene the contours and form of each public space sets off the surrounding buildings. A walk around the Cathedral Close shows why Chester is so well loved by residents and visitors. The path from Town Hall Square via St Werburgh Street and the Garden of Remembrance to the modern bell-tower, then along the City Wall to Abbey Street and Square, down the steps to the Cathedral cloisters and back through Abbey Gate to the Town Hall offers a series of visual delights - refinements of townscape - the first of which is shown on Plate 6 below.

Town Hall Square unfolds a fine vista toward the Cathedral. At first glance it seems to be a formally axial view of the symmetrical west front of the nave. This is not so. The Town Hall and Cathedral fronts are at an angle and the Town Hall stands further north than the Cathedral. A visitor who walks from the Town Hall steps finds the west facade of the Cathedral angled a little toward him. The space leading to the west front forms an extension to Town Hall Square which has no frontage parallel with its opposite number or at right angles to its neighbour. The orientation of the nave gives a fuller view of its west end and narrows the gap across St Werburgh Street to frame the lawn and buildings south of the Cathedral, the city's finest informal urban space.



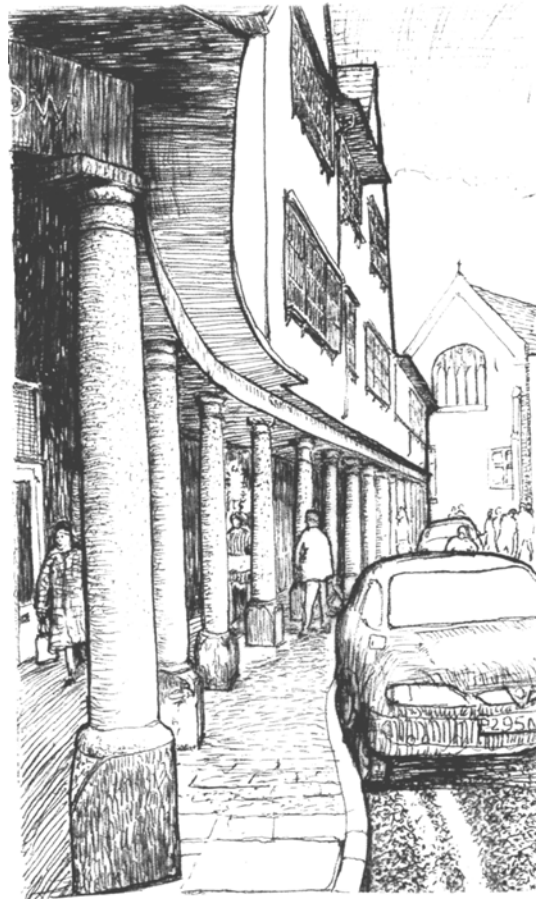
***Plate 6 - Cathedral from Town Hall Square***





The secular street has hard surfaces, but the land held by Abbey and Cathedral for a thousand years is still green. The curving line of the street and the quality of the Vernacular Revival buildings on its south side by Ayrton and Douglas are perfectly matched - a sensitively judged counterpoint to the weathered sandstone mass of the Cathedral to the north. The curved colonnade of Ayrton's terrace of shops shows how a single detail of design can add distinction to the whole scene.

***Plate 7 - St Werburgh Row 1935 by M Ayrton***



The projecting transept divides the greensward north of the street into two oases, the lawn linking with the commercial and civic buildings and the more formal Garden of Remembrance to the east.

The curving boundary softens the divide between temporal and spiritual domains, no matter that the spiked iron railings argue otherwise.

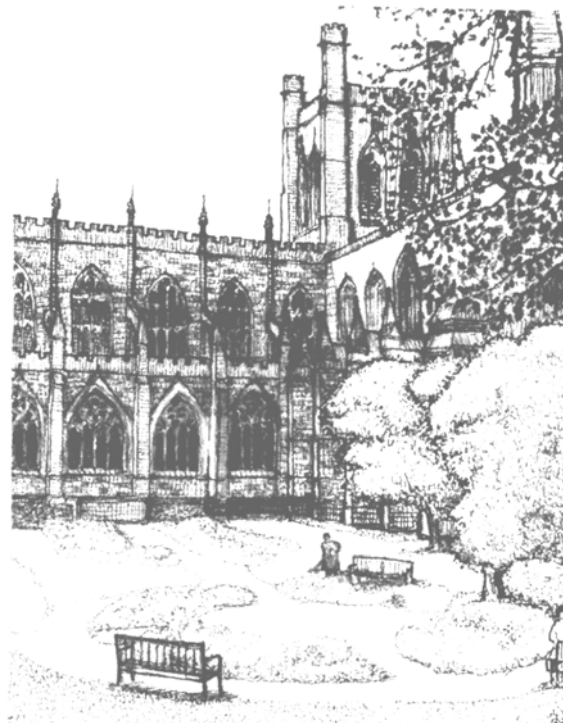
***Plate 8 - Cathedral lawn and St Werburgh Street***





The tower beyond the Garden of Remembrance and just by the City Wall was designed by GG Pace to channel the sound of the bells downward, a joy to hear in the precinct but quiet beyond. The City Wall, only a few feet higher than the Close, enjoys two contrasted vistas of the Cathedral.

From the south-east, the view across the Garden is enclosed by transept, tower, chancel and Lady Chapel. As one walks north past the east end of the great church one sees how its complex form adds variety to the scene.



***Plate 9 - South-east of Cathedral  
from the City Wall***

Next, the broad green to the north offers a view to the chapter house and the abbey's domestic buildings, with Cathedral to the left, clergy houses to the right and the soaring spire of the Town Hall on the skyline to suggest another scene beyond.

This is the sector of Chester which most richly displays the qualities of townscape dear to the heart of Flemish masters of urban painting – the beauty of the sky-line, space and harmony between buildings.



***Plate 10 - Cathedral Close from Kaleyargate***



The stone steps down from the Wall to Abbey Street are an example of the use of natural materials and craftsmanship in modest items, much valued and well used, in which Chester remains remarkably rich.



***Plate 11 - Steps to Abbey Street***

Two hundred yards north of Abbey Street the north-east corner of the Walls affords a unique panorama of the city centre. Through ten centuries the Chapters of Abbey and Cathedral have resisted the urge to pack the land they possess with buildings, so Abbey Green remains the only truly spacious area of grassland within the City Walls. Formerly the Choir School sportsfield, the Green is now used more lightly for recreation, a peaceful foreground bordered by trees, between which there are glimpses of the Close with the Cathedral tower and the Town Hall spire as landmarks on the skyline.



***Plate 12 - Abbey Green from north-east corner of City Wall***



Return to the steps: Abbey Street which runs from Kaleyargate to Abbey Square is one of the few straight streets within the City Walls, rebuilt in the 18th and early 19th century, with the houses of leading members of the Chapter on the north side and dwellings for minor canons or lay clerks to the south.



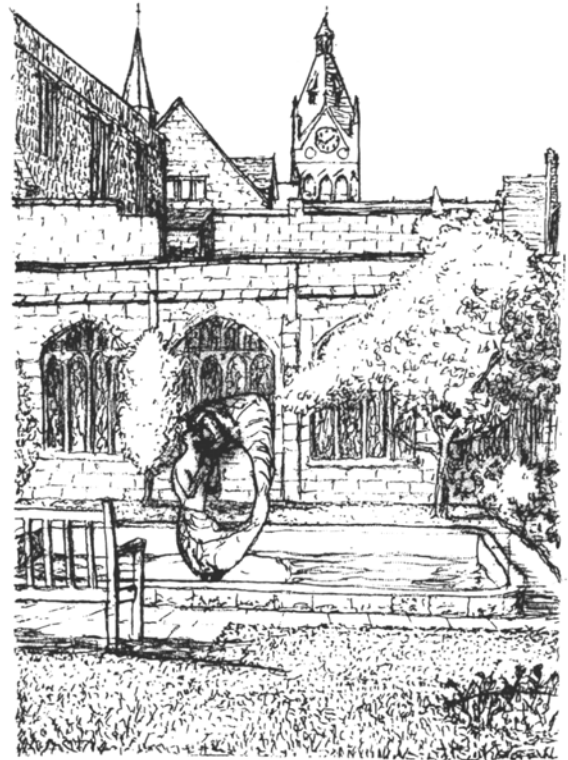
***Plate 13 - Abbey Square***

Abbey Square is the best quadrangle of Georgian houses in Chester, with a pair of earlier, more modest, 17th century dwellings and the access down a short flight of steps to the cloisters and refectory. The two Georgian terraces were built by clergymen, often well-to-do in those days, for Cathedral clergy. The south-facing terrace is the finest, but the square's layout has further interest. It is not in fact a rectangle, for it tapers quite sharply to the south. This lengthens the apparent perspective toward the Cathedral, but shortens it to the north so that the terrace looks closer. Nevertheless, the trees on the central lawn tend to conceal the illusion, particularly in summer. More evident is the effect of the elliptical lawn, which softens the sense of formality which the straight sides of the quadrangle would otherwise impart.



The Cloisters are an attractive and complete internal colonnaded square which deserves a visitor's regard for its twentieth century stained glass and the sculpted figures on the raised plinth in the pool at the centre of the garth.

**Plate 14 - Sculpted figures in the Cloister garden**



**Conclusion:** *The refinements of plan, peaceful beauty of the green setting and quality and historic interest of the buildings are of such religious, cultural and recreational value that planning policies should prohibit demolition or insensitive alteration to the heritage of built and green heritage which they comprise.*

**Objectives:** *To encourage the fullest beneficial use of the area without detriment to the quality of its components. To encourage the study of the townscape of the Close in the interest of the improvement of Chester's whole urban environment.*





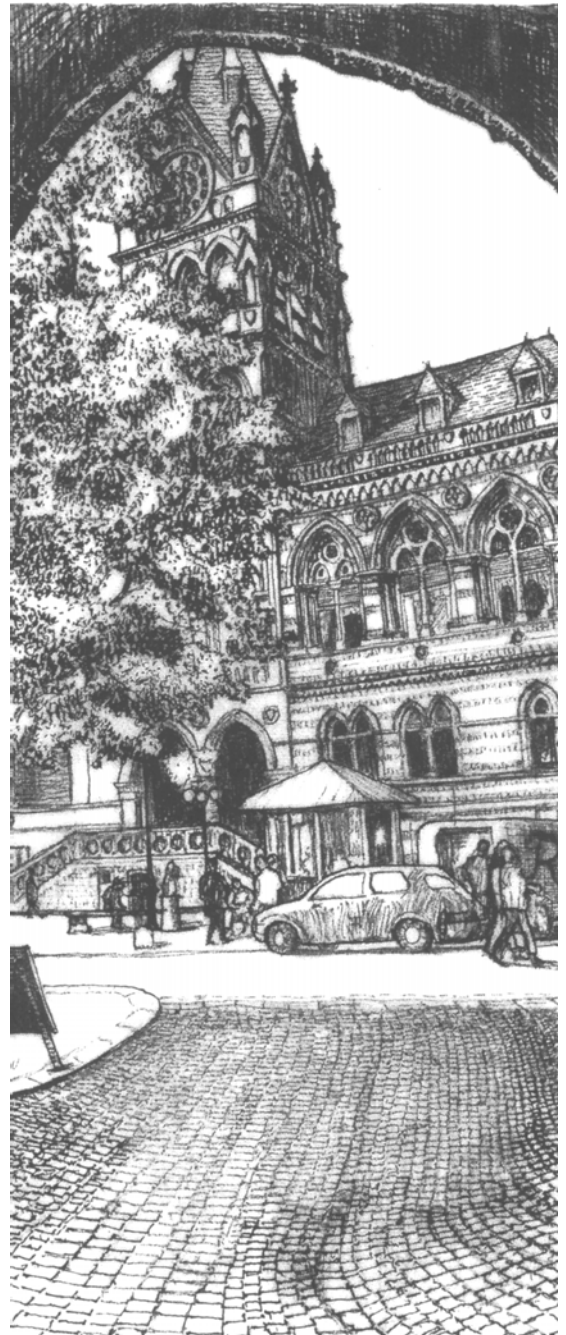
## CHAPTER 5 - THE TOWNSCAPE OF LOCAL AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Abbey Gateway frames a dramatic vista of the Town Hall, the city's principal secular building in Gothic Revival attire, whose tower and spire splendidly dominate the square. Town Hall Square is four times as long as it is wide, but enjoys refinements in plan which enrich the lengthwise views.

From the centrepoint opposite Abbey Gateway and Princess Street the square tapers gently toward each end. As Plate 15 shows, this enables a visitor to see the facades of the buildings in front in sharp perspective while walking along the square. The buildings which face the quadrangle span seven centuries in date, a lively setting to the municipal scene



***Plate 15 - Town Hall Square,  
west side***



***Plate 16 - Town Hall***

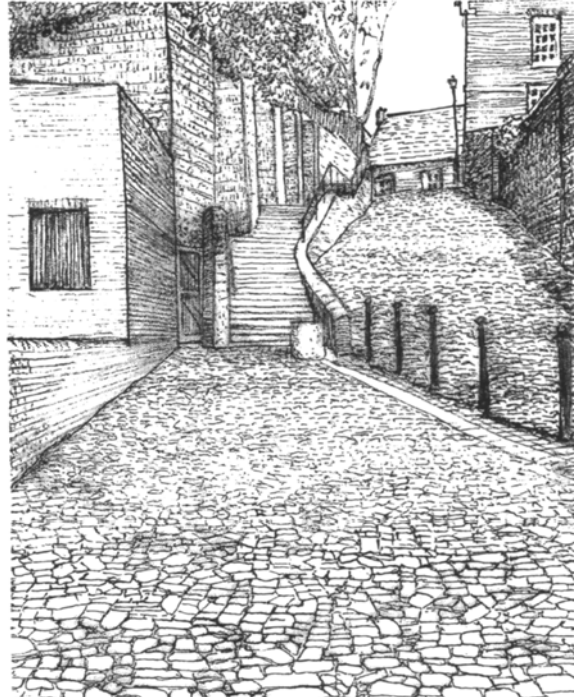




The former stronghold of the Earls of Chester presents a total contrast to the Gothic Revival Town Hall in its romantic setting. The centrepiece is Castle Square, a brilliantly envisaged example of the architecture of power, civil and military, designed by Thomas Harrison during the 1780s.

The description of the area's townscape takes the route from the Bridgegate via Shipgate Street and St Mary's Hill to the south-east corner of the square. Members of the Earls of Chester's staffs used to live to the right of this steep and picturesquely stone-stepped path, both on Castle Street and Lower Bridge Street.

The sandstone bluff on which the Church of St Mary on the Hill stands gives a hint of the strength of the castle's position

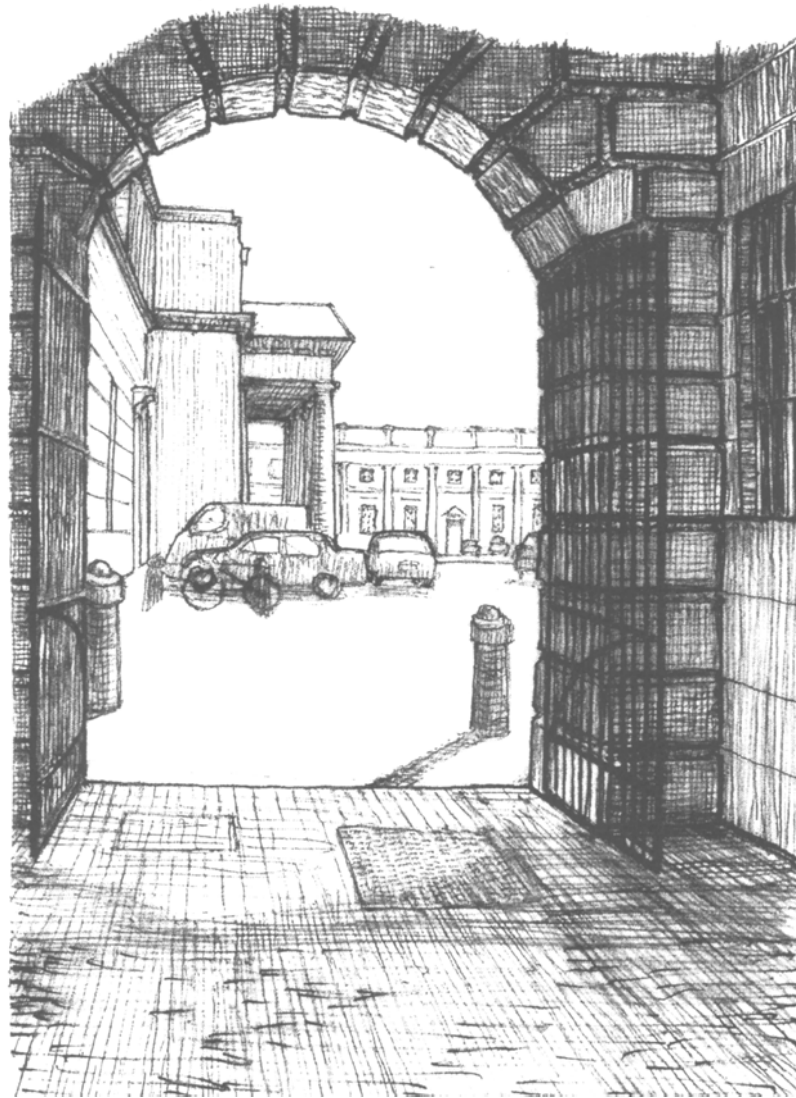


***Plate 17- Saint Mary's Hill***

The short pathway from the church to Castle Square gives another view of the bluff where Thomas Harrison took down the whole outer bailey of the castle to use its levelled site for his new square. The regimental building to the right of the pathway gives a foretaste of the stern character he was to give the Square - masonry of massive rusticated stone blocks and openings in Greek Doric and Ionic style applied to a plan of exact Roman geometry.

Castle Square illustrates the sharpest contrast with its neighbours to be found amongst the historic buildings of Chester. The path to the square via Saint Mary's Hill displays the visual drama which informally grouped buildings clinging to a rocky bluff can excite. Harrison's design epitomises order and calm - Greek perfection of proportion and mouldings, but Roman symmetry of plan.





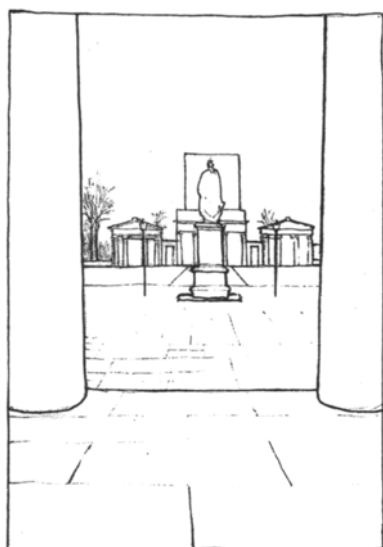
***Plate 18 - Archway from Saint Mary's Hill to Castle Square***

The archway from St Mary's Hill provides an oblique view of Castle Square which softens the formality of the axial prospect from the ceremonial gateway on Grosvenor Road. Usually too full of cars to be fully appreciated, the towers of Saint Mary's Church and the inner bailey gatehouse, behind the far corners of the square, add a touch of romance to a masterly classic design.



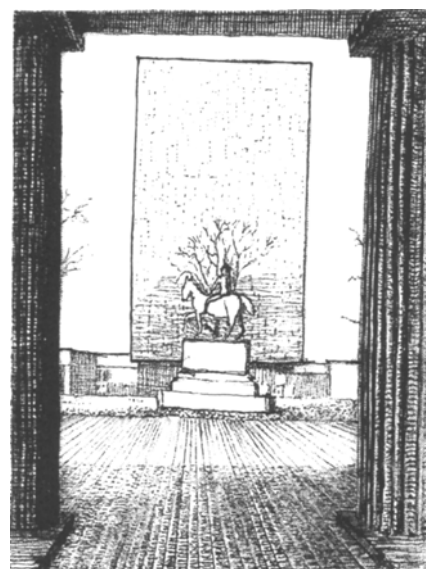


***Plate 19 - Axial view of Castle Square***



***Plate 20 – The architect's vision:  
Police HQ from Crown  
Courts portico***

**Castle Square**



***Plate 21 – The visitor's  
view: Police HQ from  
the Propylea***

The former Police Headquarters (now demolished) on Nicholas Street was criticised for its height, bulk and sternly geometric form, but its architect clearly sought to follow Thomas Harrison's principles, aligning his building exactly on the axis of the Courts portico and the Propylea of Castle Square and seeking to reinterpret their axial regularity and classic proportions in his design. The fault lies in the demands of his brief for so large and austere a building on so sensitive a site. Its replacement, the HQ development, is bulkier and elicits the same concerns in that it dominates this historically sensitive area.



Chester Castle has medieval features of much interest, particularly the chapel in the medieval gatehouse to the inner bailey, and the ramparts command an excellent view across the Dee, but it is not adequately signed or managed to attract visitors. Castle Square is "one of the most powerful monuments of the Greek Revival in the whole of England", so it deserves excellent presentation. (N Pevsner : ***The Buildings of England***).



***Plate 22 - Agricola's Tower from rampart of Chester Castle***

Castle Square is unattractively presented as if it were a private car park. Most visitors to Chester are probably unaware of it, and the adjacent or flanking buildings including Colvin House, Napier House and the Regimental Museum. Colvin and Napier, in the ownership of the Crown Estate, have remained empty for many years owing to complexities of land ownerships and conflicting owners' interests.

***Conclusion:*** *The City Council is taking steps to open up the Town Hall to visitors, but the siting of masts and plastic banners seriously disrupts views of the Square and its buildings. Castle Square and Chester Castle are potentially important and attractive monuments, but their management is in several hands and no effective attempt appears to be made to advertise or present them.*

***Objective:*** *To encourage the relevant authorities to adopt active and sensitive policies to improve the environment, access and enjoyment of attractions in the public domain.*





## CHAPTER 6 - RESIDENTIAL STREETS

The Cathedral Close and Abbey Green are illustrated in section 5 and the residential element in shopping street buildings in section 7. The present section analyses the townscape of other groups of dwellings, historic and recent, which occupy pockets of land between the main shopping streets and the City Walls. They add oases of special interest - and domestic peace - to the fringes of the city's thronged commercial centre.

The areas to be described contain town houses built between the late 16th century and the early 19th century, later 19th century cottages and recently built flats and houses. A large proportion of the houses dated before 1850, often now offices, are listed buildings standing on attractive residential streets. Much of the pre-19th century development is on land which was owned by religious houses up to 1540. The only pre-18th century cottages to survive are the truncated row of almshouses with timber framed fronts which face the eastern Wall across Park Street.

The redevelopment of the conventual land which began in the late 16th century was designed to offer sites for comfortable town houses. Most of the streets on which they stand are gently curved on plan and/or in gradient. This offers attractively changing perspectives as one walks along the street or looks at it obliquely through a house window. The variety of effect may be seen on King Street, White Friars, Black Friars and, outside conventual land, Bunce Street, Castle Street, St Mary's Hill, Shipgate and Duke Streets.

The buildings are largely of individual design, varying enough in height and profile to enliven the skyline, but without damage to the harmony of the scene. The walls are mostly brick, sometimes stone-dressed, and the roofs Welsh slate. Stanley Place is the only formal residential square, whose open west end commands a view toward Wales.

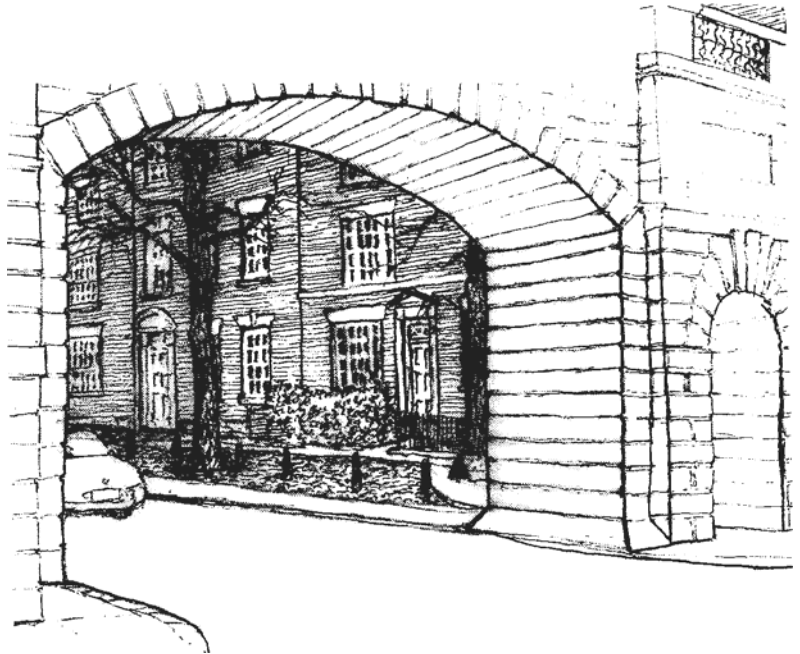


***Plate 23 - King Street from the east***





Northgate Street, Watergate Street and Lower Bridge Street become residential in character as they approach the City Walls. Recent planning applications suggest that the reversion of upper floors from office to residential use may increase in pace. The outer part of Northgate Street retains the character of an old market town where small traders could live above the shops they kept. Watergate Street has an Elizabethan town house and a Georgian house by Thomas Harrison on the south side and some fifteen terraced houses. Bridge Place set back from Lower Bridge Street is the best terrace of houses on a main street in central Chester.



***Plate 24 - Bridge Place as seen through the Bridgegate***

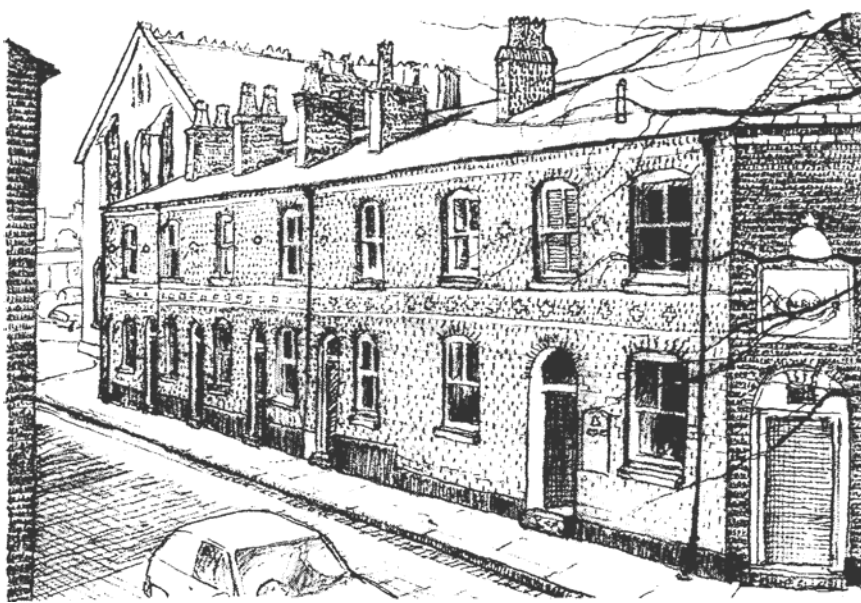
Because only a little of the Victorian housing which stood within the City Walls survives, the remnant is of special historic and cultural value. It provides an insight into the improvements achieved during the second half of the 19th century - and its condition shows how much it is still appreciated by its occupants.

The court housing most typical of its date is Gamul Court and Terrace (off Lower Bridge Street). A group of three more spacious court houses (45A 45B and 47A Bridge Street Row) is of equal interest, but not accessible to the public.

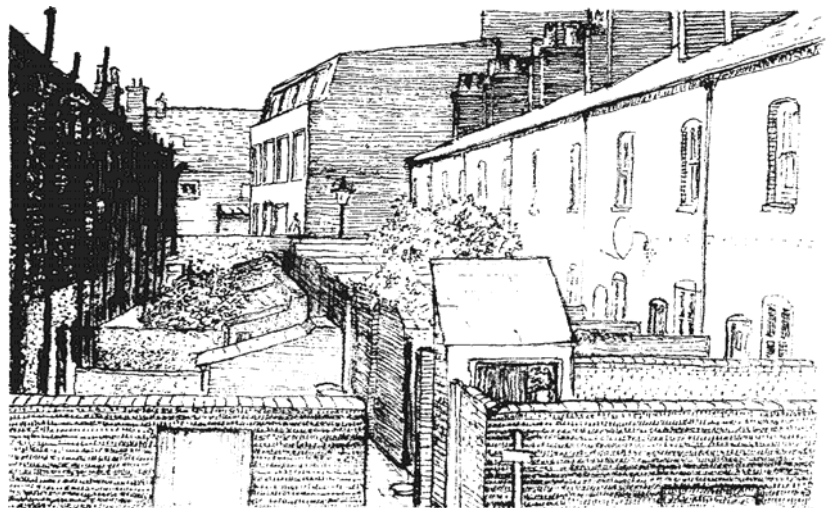
Dwellings on minor streets are more numerous. A terrace of Italianate 1850s town houses and two rows of model cottages, perhaps built by the 2nd Marquess of Westminster, stand on Grosvenor Place and Bunce Street. Fifty years later Charles Brown built the model cottages on Commonhall and Old Hall Streets for assistants at his shop in Eastgate Street.



Well built cottages of simpler but attractive design can be seen from the City Walls. On Canning Street and Water Tower Street close to the north leg of the Wall they have more stylistic variety, but the area which best shows the environment in which a Victorian community might live is south of the Newgate. Albion Street and Albion Place survive complete. The beautifully maintained cottages adjoin the former chapel and militia barracks at the junction with Volunteer Street; toward the City Wall is the Little Albion, the residents' "local".



***Plate 25 - Albion Street  
from the City Wall***



***Plate 26 - The backs of  
cottages, Albion Place and  
Street***

From Saint Martin's Way via Water Tower Street, Rufus Court, Abbey Green, the Cathedral Close, Park Street, Duke Street, Shipgate Street, Saint Mary's Hill, Castle Street, Grosvenor Road and Nun's Road to the Watergate, dwellings dating from the 16th to the 20th century form a harmonious chain. They comply with the rules governing town form in almost all historic cities: they remain subordinate in scale to landmarks such as cathedral, churches and town hall and to the buildings which line the main shopping streets; their layout encompasses a lively variety of formal and informal urban spaces which leave vistas toward the city's landmarks open; the materials of walls and roofs contribute as nothing else can to the local distinctiveness of our townscape.

The recent residential development between Saint Martin's Way and City Walls Road shows (no less than the Moat House Hotel) the difficulty of achieving accord between the townscape of a city characterised by individually designed close-grained buildings erected over nearly a thousand years and the large-scale "go anywhere" stamp of present-day schemes.



**Plate 27- New dwellings west of Saint Martins Way**

**Conclusion:** *The residential streets and the smaller groups of houses and cottages within the City Walls are of such visual quality and interest that careful policies are needed to ensure their protection and conserve the settings in which they stand.*

**Objectives:** *To develop policies to encourage the reconversion of floorspace now in other uses to fulfil its original residential purpose.*

*To ensure that new residential development within the City Walls accords in scale with those houses or cottages which contribute to the local distinctiveness of Chester, with special attention to the skyline and the protection of views toward historic landmarks and other points of visual interest.*





## CHAPTER 7 - SHOPPING STREETS, LANES AND COURTS

Chester's main shopping streets follow the general lines of the principal *viae* of the Roman fortress, but their present charm and interest reflect the refinements which have occurred during the subsequent 1900 years. Lanes and courts behind the main streets are features of most ancient towns. Five remain in commercial use in Chester: Saint Michael's Row off Bridge Street Row was re-created by WT Lockwood for the 2nd Duke of Westminster in 1909-1911 and now forms part of the Grosvenor Precinct; Rufus Court east of Northgate Street was reconstituted during the 1980s; St Peter's Churchyard behind the corner of Northgate and Watergate Street is a peaceful enclave secularised two centuries ago; Godstall Lane links St. Werburgh Street to Eastgate Street; Music Hall lane cuts from Northgate Street to St Werburgh Street.



***Plate 26 - Rufus Court looking toward Northgate Street***



***Plate 29- St Peter's Churchyard***



***Plate 30 - Godstall Lane***



The following illustrations and text aim to highlight distinctive characteristics of each main shopping street.

**Northgate Street:** near its midpoint the street broadens to open the view to the west front of the Cathedral and display the Town Hall whose tower and spire are the principal landmarks within the city walls. To north and south the street retains the domestic scale of the city before its enlargement began in the 19th century: Town Hall Square is visually the climax, but in character it speaks of ecclesiastic splendour and civic pride rather than the more commercial appeal of Eastgate Street.

Northgate Street has a wide range of visual and historic interest: 13th century Abbey Gateway; restaurant in a pair of 15th century timber-framed houses; northmost leg of medieval Rows; a 17th century hotel; shops in Georgian buildings; splendid 1865 Town Hall; timber-framed arcaded terrace of vernacular revival shops; Edwardian facade of the city library; 1936 Odeon cinema; Chester's splendid civic square; catering and entertainment in Rufus Court; Georgian hotel in Saint Peter's Churchyard. The refinements of layout in Town Hall Square have been analysed in sections 4 and 5.

Plate 31 shows the intimate quality of the northern part of the street and the importance of the town hall spire as a landmark. Plate 32 suggests how the curve of Northgate Street to the right as it nears the as yet unseen Cross subtly draws a visitor's eye toward that focus of the shopping streets.



**Plate 31 - North Northgate Street**



**Plate 32 - South Northgate Street**

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Originated by Oliver Bott in October 2001: Re-issued in June 2008



The Chester Civic Trust



**Saint Werburgh Street** is described in section 4 except for its southern end, widened and largely rebuilt 1874-1899 by John Douglas to afford a superbly designed vista gently rising from Eastgate Street toward the Cathedral

**Eastgate Street** attracts more visitors than any other street within the city walls. It has a number of the most popular shops, but other qualities weigh in its favour. There is an eye-catcher at each end - St Peter's church, the Cross, the projection of No 2 Watergate Street and the richly detailed timber framed shops at the corner of Bridge Street to the west and the Eastgate surmounted by the fine copper-domed wrought-iron clock tower to the east. Neither eye catcher wholly closes the view beyond. To the west the gentle curve of Watergate Street reveals Booth's Mansion and the Guildhall spire; to the east the slight changes of alignment of Foregate Street show that there is more to explore beyond the archway

Eastgate Street broadens slightly towards its centre, each side having a slight concave curve which beckons visitors inward from its ends. As they pace the street they can enjoy lively views into Bridge Street and Northgate Street - and to the Cathedral by Godstall Lane and Saint Werburgh Street. The cross-streets connect directly with all the other shopping streets with Rows and through a covered mall to the Grosvenor Precinct.



***Plate 33 - Eastgate Street from the Row at Godstall Lane***

**Bridge Street and Lower Bridge Street** lead south from the Cross. The east side of the street and Row link directly at both levels with Eastgate Street; shops, restaurants and cafe bars occupy most of the property. The west side is a little less easily reached; it has undergone more conversions than its opposite number from retail to office and other uses, particularly at Row level. It is the widest and sunniest of the shopping streets, but it tapers slightly toward the north, helping to focus one's attention on Saint Peter's church, exactly right in scale and position to close the attractive vista.

The street leads, beyond the heavily trafficked crossing with Pepper Street, to Lower Bridge Street which drops down to the Old Dee Bridge. An observer who stands at the Cross will scarcely be aware that the city centre continues beyond Pepper Street, with two important medieval town houses (now the Falcon Inn and the Old King's Head Hotel) and a number of good restaurants - or that the Grosvenor Museum, the Castle, the City and County Record Office and the Groves are sited that way.

The problem is with the lie of the land. Bridge Street slopes gently to the south, but Lower Bridge Street falls steeply to the river. The change of gradient conceals the buildings south of Pepper Street from an observer in Bridge Street; there is no adequate landmark at the south end of the street to draw a visitor on, because the Heritage Centre (formerly Saint Michael's church) stands too far back to serve as an eye-catcher. Perhaps a major and attractive sculpture here may be the solution.



**Plate 34 - Bridge Street: view north**



**Plate 35 - view south**



**Watergate Street** retains more medieval buildings than any other Chester street. During the middle ages it led to the port and was the merchants' natural choice for their homes and show-rooms. As the port gradually silted up Watergate lost its advantage, so Eastgate and Bridge Street were preferred for redevelopment by Georgian and Victorian shopkeepers.

The interiors of some seven of the ancient town houses are open to the public at the cost of a cup of tea, a glass of wine or a browse in a shop; and two 16th to 17th century houses are in the hands of charitable bodies who welcome visitors when their own activities allow.

***Plate 36 - Watergate Street: view west from the Cross***



The attractiveness of Watergate Street owes as much as any other street to the way that the slight curve in its plan west of the Cross adds variety and surprise to the vista - and shows off the landmark buildings, notably at the entrance to the street, then Booth Mansion and the spire of the Guildhall.

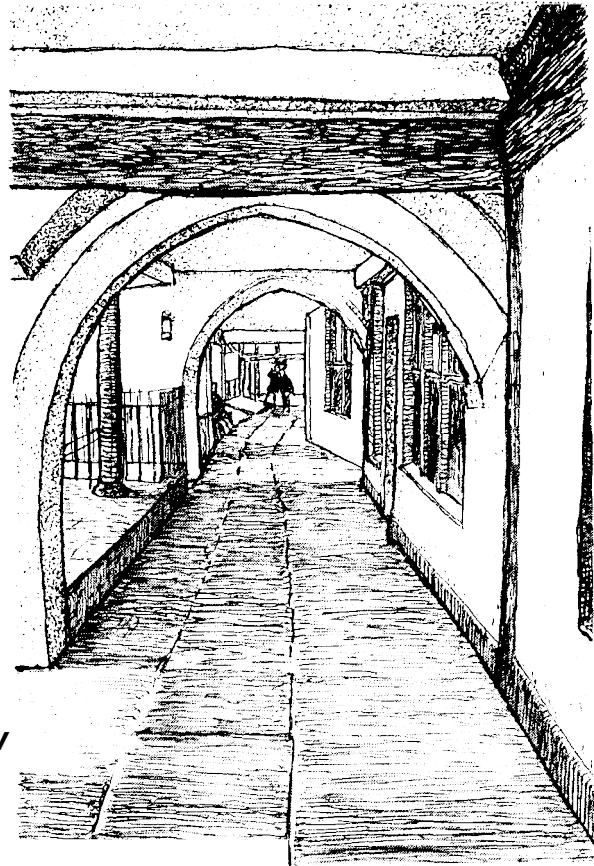
***Plate 37 - Watergate Street: view east from Crook St***





Between the Cross and Nicholas Street Watergate Street is perhaps the most fascinating street in England. The Row on its north side best illustrates the scale, proportions and ambience which existed in the medieval Rows, still the truly unique feature of Chester's shopping streets.

Between Nicholas Street and the Watergate the street was largely redeveloped with town houses during the eighteenth century; the exception is the timber framed Stanley Palace, the only Elizabethan town house in Chester, set back from the street corner.



**Plate 38 - Watergate Street Row**

**Conclusion** *The shopping streets, courts and lanes show how much Chester owes to the refinements of townscape which have depended upon often small-scale decisions made by a multitude of landowners and designers over a period of nine centuries. Although loosely based on the rectilinear street plan of the former Roman fortress, it is the subtle accretion of informal change which makes the city within the walls so well loved by residents, workers and visitors. Scarcely a street is straight or constant in width; vistas toward landmarks are important; the close grain, variety in age and in architectural treatment of adjacent buildings lends visual excitement to the scene, especially in Eastgate Street.*

*The captivating complexity of townscape is the basis of Chester's popularity amongst residents and visitors. The future prosperity of the city depends on its conservation and enhancement, for which the cooperation of developers and the skill of their architects are essential factors.*

**Objectives:** *To ensure that modifications of existing buildings and their settings are sensitively designed. To achieve the most sympathetic linkage of existing townscape with the design and layout of new development: protection and enhancement of the quality and interest of the city's skyline and vistas, harmony of scale and careful choice of materials are all vital to success.*

